

TRAINING NOTES



Tough Training in Tough Times Infantry Officer Candidate School—1942

FROM AN INFANTRY MAGAZINE INTERVIEW WITH
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Editor's Note: Today's graduates of Fort Benning's Officer Candidate School (OCS) can look back with pride on the legacy of their predecessors, many of whom served with distinction in World War II. I have asked one of those distinguished graduates, Colonel (Retired) Robert B. Nett, to comment on the value of the training he received as an officer candidate in 1942.

Following graduation, he returned to the Pacific Theater, where his courage and leadership enabled him to successfully lead his platoon against a stubborn and determined Japanese adversary. Then Lieutenant Nett was awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism on Leyte in December 1944.

Here is the OCS experience, as recounted by Colonel Nett.

The shock of Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning seemed to compound with each day: Up at about 5:30 each morning, 30 minutes of rigorous physical training (PT), followed by reveille formation at 6:00. During calisthenics, everyone in the company was to do pushups until we were all flat on our faces. We were taught by a First Lieutenant who looked

like a professional football player and had been given a direct commission to come in and teach calisthenics to officer candidates. He would go through the routines, and as soon as we were all flat on our faces, he would call us to attention and double-time us around the field. Finally, he would dismiss us with a few comments about how sorry we were, how out of shape we were, and what we needed to do to get in condition before the next session, which was bright and early the next morning!

The mess hall opened immediately after reveille formation, and after breakfast we returned to our little hutment in the remote Harmony Church area of the sprawling Army post. These huts were made of Celotex, a fiberboard made from sugar cane fiber and covered with tarpaper; the floors were pure sand. There were a total of eight officer candidates per hut. We commonly referred to our huts as "tarpaper shacks."

Each structure had a small roof extension that protruded out over the door about two feet and a small porch made in the form of a foot scraper, a series of boards about one inch apart on edge so that we could scrape our boots before we went into the hut. To the right of the doorway was a rack holding a couple of

brooms, which we used to sweep the sand smooth as we worked our way out in the morning. (The sand had to be cleaned free of footprints each time we left.)

Our transportation to the field was called a "Cattle Car." This was a long trailer previously used for horse cavalry. It had benches down each side and a third one down the middle, and could hold about 50 people, all in full combat gear. It wasn't unusual for the Tactical Officer to tell everyone to stand up and move back so that another 10 or 20 men could be fitted in. It then became a challenge to sit down, and usually someone ended up on top of you. It was even more of a challenge when you consider that we were all armed with rifles that could get tangled up in the mass of legs, arms, and other equipment.

Classes usually started at 7:00 in the morning. We had to draw our weapons from the weapons room, and clean them if necessary. Next, we headed to the training site. Each period of training began with an explanation, in which the instructor gave us a detailed description of the problem or task we were assigned. The second part was a demonstration, usually given by schooled

troops. We were next given or put through a practical exercise where we followed the same procedures that had been demonstrated to us. The last part was the critique phase, where we were assembled and told what we did or did not do towards accomplishing what we were assigned. Most instruction was for a four-hour period.

We normally ate in the field, using the mess kits we carried in the combat packs on our backs. We were occasionally provided with utensils and paper plates. The meals tasted very good to me, after subsisting on C-rations week after week in the Pacific. When we had a ten-minute break, the command was given: "Quick time off the stands! Double time, post!" which meant to get off the stands quickly but in a proper manner so no one would get hurt, and then double time over to our platoon leader. We would then have calisthenics for five minutes. After this, we were given the rest of the period for personal time, to ask questions, and to do whatever else was needed. When the whistle blew, we had to move back rapidly to the stands and be ready to go when instruction began again.

We only had box toilets and no running water except over in the shower room—a small room with about ten shower heads—and we could go there to do our showering and cleaning up. Quite frequently, we would find ourselves there at 11:00 or 12:00 o'clock at night, studying field manuals. This was because we often had instruction until very late and then were given reading assignments for the next day. After we went back to our huts, our weapons had to be thoroughly cleaned, inspected, oiled, and put back in the racks for the next day. This all had to be done by the time the call to quarters was sounded.

About one-third of our training was at night. This entailed everything from a night compass course to night attack and patrolling, and all of the different rudiments of night warfare. Those of us who had already been in combat knew how important this instruction was. During my 8½ months in the Pacific Theater, I had learned how skilled the Japanese were at night operations, and so I paid particular attention to this and

other blocks of instruction, and urged my peers to do the same. I learned a great deal that helped considerably upon my return to the Pacific after graduation. We learned many helpful tips, both from our instructors and from classmates who were already combat veterans.

Since the Japanese operated frequently at night, we employed a number of field expedients to deny them the element of surprise. At a time when both barbed and concertina wire were in short supply, we often strung commo wire parallel to and in front of our positions and hung C-ration cans with a few pebbles in them as early warning of enemy movement to our front, sides, and rear. Lacking anything comparable to today's Claymore antipersonnel mines, we also had to improvise, using quarter-pound blocks of TNT.

One of my first periods of instruction was Map Reading. I considered myself talented in this area and looked forward to it. We were taken in groups of three on a truck with a tarpaulin pulled down over the back. We had no idea where we were going.

We were dropped off by numbers and our mission was, first, to find out where we were. We were given a photo map of the area and it was up to us to determine how to get to a certain point. We noticed on the map that we were by a hard-surfaced road that was covered with crushed stone and clay mixed together. I suggested to my group that one person go up the road for ten minutes and one person go down the road for ten minutes and see if we could find a bridge or culvert that we could compare to something on the map. This map was a series of photos put together with a grid superimposed on it. Sure enough, one of the men who was sent out came back in about eight minutes and reported a bridge to our north. We moved up to the bridge and started identifying terrain features, with the help of a little moonlight. The leader of our group took out his compass and shot an azimuth. We started walking on that azimuth, and my mission was to count off every 100 yards. I took a handful of gravel and each time we reached 100 yards, I stuck one pebble in my pocket.

We had gone about 1,000 yards when he said we should almost be there. Sure enough, when we went a little further, there was Victory Pond. (Of course, we didn't know it was Victory Pond at the time but it was a pond and we looked for it on our map.) At this point I realized that we had been traveling on a back azimuth. The compass man had looked at the wrong edge of the compass. I decided to take the map and study it further. Finally, I saw a little intermittent creek bed and pointed out that we should move down it, cross several fields, come out on a road, follow it a little way, and we should be where we were supposed to be. The group decided to go along with my suggestion. When we finally got to the road, we scouted it very carefully and—lo and behold—we found our reporting station. We reported in and the sergeant took our card and told us we were the first ones in! "How did you make it so fast?" he asked. The others looked at me with funny expressions as I said, "We're just experienced NCOs who know how to read a compass." He looked at us for a minute then told us, "Go down the road for about a mile and there'll be a truck waiting. You get in the truck and wait and when we get it filled, we'll take you in and there'll be coffee and doughnuts. You'll be able to relax and get a good night's sleep." We thanked him and moved off down the road. We fell asleep in the truck and I don't even remember its moving. We got to the company area and I woke the others and said, "We're home!"

The quality of land navigation instruction at Fort Benning was superb, and every leader—officer and enlisted—must be thoroughly familiar with using a map and compass. Without it, he cannot coordinate direct and indirect fires, effectively maneuver his unit, or conduct the logistical operations that will sustain the unit in combat.

The most intriguing courses, however, were the seven live-fires we conducted on problems ranging from a night relief to an attack on a fortified position. These were full-up operations that included flame weapons, shaped and satchel charges, hand grenades, and Bangalore torpedoes. This training in-

cluded mortar and artillery fires, and my class was unanimous in commending the artillery committee for the best instruction presented to us. They left us with complete confidence that we could direct indirect fires when and where they were needed. The value of this instruction was borne out some months later, on Leyte, when my 4.2-inch mortar observer was wounded and I had to direct my own mortar fires.

We had all levels of experience in our Officer Candidate platoon. We had some soldiers who had been in combat, some who had been overseas and had trained with the British, and others who had just completed basic training and a short leadership course. This made it quite a challenge for each individual, as well as those in charge of the live-fire problems. In spite of my combat experience, I was embarrassed at how much I had to learn, and as a result paid close attention to the heavy volume of information presented. Live fire was the name of the game, and what we learned about it in those grueling hours would pay dividends in terms of lives saved and objectives seized once we found ourselves in combat.

The curriculum was spelled out thoroughly and it became a six-days-a-week, in-the-field, exercise-after-exercise experience. One-third of that time would be at night in such courses as night attack or night patrolling with the prescribed equipment. Sunday was a day for church and administrative details. The one-hour schedule for church service was respected, and all attended. Upon returning to the company area, we were required to do all types of administrative work such as filling out and signing forms, filling out questionnaires pertaining to our security clearances, and similar activities. There was little or no free time except for that allowed for religious services.

One Sunday afternoon, we all went to the theater, and up on stage were the battalion commander and his staff officers. There was to be a formal dinner at the commander's home, and we were drilled on such courtesies as seating the ladies, saying Grace, passing the food, and properly using the silverware. At the entrance was to be a table with a

white tablecloth on which would be a silver tray. We were to place the name cards from our wallets on the tray—a card for each adult member of the family. Protocol called for us to do this without the commander or his wife seeing us.

The life of an officer candidate was as challenging in the cantonment area as in the field. I can remember standing in the pouring rain when this big six-foot two-inch tech sergeant would give us a speech that went something like this: "I don't give a damn if you have gotten a little wet. These weapons will be thoroughly cleaned. I will inspect them and then you will put a thin coat of oil on them and take them to the arms room. Do I make myself clear?" All this time, he was standing under the porch of one of the huts while we were out in the pouring rain, standing in the mud, in platoon formation! We couldn't wait to get in that hut and clean our weapons! It got to be a joke and we would hear others in the hut mimicking the tech sergeant as they were cleaning weapons.

As we moved on to the final phase of our training, we were given tactical training by three officers whom we referred to as "The Mad Majors." One had a bayonet scar across his cheek, from a wound received in World War I. I think they acquired their collective nickname because they believed so deeply in what they were teaching that they often got emotional. Being officer candidates, we often had to find something smart to say about instructors—but never to their faces, of course.

The Weapons Department of the Infantry School did a fine job. We went through every weapon in the infantry. We not only detail-stripped it, assembled and reassembled it, but also were taken on the range and fired a familiarization course followed by a record course. This included weapons such as the 37mm antitank weapon right up to the 60mm and 81mm mortars. We needed every extra minute to cover all this subject matter. Weather was no impediment to our tight schedule. The most we could expect was a set of bleachers with a cover on it so we could listen to the instruction and take notes.

Due to the urgency of the war effort, it was out of the question for us to have a large graduation ceremony. There was no time for a class book, and all we could hope for was a roster and a little folder for a memento. We were Class 136 and we graduated December 26, 1942. I remember that our class went to Theater Number 3 in Harmony Church and were seated in alphabetical order. When the first sergeant gave the word, he would tell each individual to stand and face to the right and when he finished calling the row, we would move out to the stage and line up on one side. When the battalion adjutant called our names, we walked smartly across the stage, saluted, shook hands with the assistant commandant, and received our diplomas. We then went over and shook hands with the battalion commander, company commander, and tactical officers, and then returned to our seats.

Not all of my classmates were able to graduate with their peers. In my row at graduation, for example, there were two candidates whose names were not called. They had on their uniforms and were ready to go, but it was not to be. While we were engaged in training, if a candidate was to be eliminated from the course for one reason or another, a jeep would drive up with the message that he was to report to the company commander. When we returned from the field, the man and all of his equipment would have vanished.

Most of us, however, were able to complete the course successfully and graduate. After the ceremony, we marched outside, gave three cheers, and put on our rank. Next, we marched back to the company area where we were given pay and allowances and our orders on where to report. I was ordered to the 77th Infantry Division at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. We then took buses into town, either to the bus station or the train depot. While I was getting ready to board the train for Fort Jackson after getting my ticket, I went to the restroom, where I saw one of my fellow candidates putting on first lieutenant bars. I asked, "My, don't you think that's inappropriate? It's gonna be a while before you make first lieu-

tenant." He smiled and said, "Nett, in each class, there's an FBI agent, and he goes through the class and monitors the character of all the candidates. This is the third class that I've graduated with. I'm going home on a 10-day leave, and I've been a first lieutenant for over a year!" I shook his hand and congratulated him, then went out and got on my train.

Sitting on the train, I found myself thinking back on all the trying times of the school, but I also realized that I had been very well prepared for all of the duties I was about to take on. I knew

that I had also been taught those qualities which are essential for a good leader and the successful running of a platoon. We had also been taught discipline. Each of us was so disciplined that when the first sergeant told us to walk out the side door after graduation, we did it without question. As we came out, there he was, giving us our first salute as officers and collecting his dollar. (It was tradition to give a dollar to the first individual to salute you.) We were all very happy to give him that dollar, and we realized that we owed him a lot more than that.

When the train finally arrived and unloaded, our main concern was finding Fort Jackson. A representative was on hand to direct us to buses, which took us directly to the headquarters building. In the basement, we found the adjutant general staff officer, who took charge. A new life was beginning. I walked proudly, aware of the gold bars on my shoulders. Looking back, I will always remember the thrill of receiving my diploma, standing, and raising my right hand, and taking my oath as a commissioned officer in the United States Army.